

1995 Report Card

Men on the Mike

With only weeks until the heat of midyear, the broad expansion of pay-per-view events are challenging the best talents of mat mike men.

Accordingly, the time is at hand for the third annual *Matwatch* Report Card for Announcers. We evaluate the key play-by-play and color commentators on the basis of enthusiasm, play-by-play quality, interviewing skills and blending with partners.

MATWATCH '95

MAY 12, 1995

VOL. 3, NO. 4

Weak Predictions

In Your House Not in Your Face

NEW YORK—Despite forecasts of a low price, giveaway and compact format rolling up a high percentage buy-rate, early returns are for an under-performance by *WWF in Your House*.

While the cable pay-per-view authority, *Multichannel News*, was not expected to track the show's subscription performance in more than a peripheral fashion, a survey of leading cable operators the week after the show indicates the show's subscriptions may fall as far as 40 per cent below projections.

The home giveaway and \$14.95 retail price had predictions of a 1.5-1.7 per cent buy rate (the latter figure is expected to be the public story from Titan Sports) in the week before the event. However, major city multisystem operators are projecting a 0.9-1.1 per cent range for the show (final figures will not be available for approximately 45 days).

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At the time of the review, we had not received samples of the new *Ozark Mountain*, *Deep South*, or *Mid-South* programs being produced in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi. But the review will cover the key WWF, WCW, ECW, SMW, NWA and USWA programs.

Tony Schiavone, WCW: Schiavone continues as the most disappointing announcer for a 12-year veteran. Schiavone's lack of growth is demonstrated in his inconsistency as a take-charge commentator. This has largely been true since he was elevated to replace Gordon Solie on TBS in 1985. However, of late, Schiavone has performed weak on technical aspects of wrestling, even to the level of names of holds.

His enthusiasm level is up a bit over last year when he was reportedly worried almost daily about the prospect of Jim Ross returning to WCW. But Schiavone, rather than developing a style which may create his own identity, continues to try to emulate Vince McMahon on the major shows (an impersonation noticeable, of late). Virtually every time he attempts to build intensity during a late run-in or a Hulk Hogan comeback, his voice cracks. Schiavone simply does not possess the vocal strength to duplicate the McMahon carnival barker style or the Ross prizefight style during confrontational moments.

Schiavone had grown so weak on interviews, that job had virtually been removed from his assignments until recent weeks when Gene Okerlund's health problems took Okerlund away from that spot. Tony never has learned to be aggressively confrontational with heels and is reduced to the level of a mikeholding statue.

The May 20 edition of *WCW Worldwide* further illustrates his plight in an interview situation which was probably not Schiavone's fault. After Hogan and Randy Savage removed masks to cancel their Dos Amigos impersonations, Hogan placed his red mask over Schiavone's face, along with Savage's hat, reducing Schiavone to a virtual clown at the show's close.

When Schiavone is at his best, he does focus consistently on the action and rarely drifts away from the television matches in the ring to deal with sidebar issues. But his pairing with Bobby Heenan continues suspect because he appears to enjoy playing straight man to Heenan more than keeping enough creative tension alive, as McMahon and Heenan frequently did in the WWF.

OVERALL GRADE: C -
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Behind the Mike: A Report Card

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Joey Styles, ECW: Styles has been the darling of the hardcore crowd ever since its love affair began with *Extreme Championship Wrestling*. But, from this corner, his vote as Announcer of the Year in several yearender polls in 1994 was not only overrated but premature.

No doubt, Styles has the most intense and charged delivery since Jim Ross. Therein is where the problem is, considering the style of program ECW is.

Two of the greatest announcers in the history of sport, Lindsey Nelson and Vin Scully, say in Curt Smith's *Voices of the Game* many mainstream sports commentators make the mistake of trying to be "on" for the duration of a game, rather than building to the intensity when the contest is at its peak excitement.

Styles falls into that category to a tee, although one can argue the caution-to-the-wind style of ECW often lends itself to reckless commentary.

Without question, Styles has the potential to be a breakthrough performer in the industry; however, his enunciation needs work, he sometimes overpowers the action and he lacks the experience handling interviews.

He is at his best when the ring action has no change-of-pace. He is at his weakest during rare instances when ECW competitors actually wrestle. As a colleague on *The Real Wrestling Hotline* once said, "You can say what you want to about ECW but this is not wrestling." Herein is where Styles' achilles heel appears. He can handle the brutality. He lacks the precision to be a top-flight pure wrestling commentator—yet.

OVERALL GRADE: B -

Vince McMahon, WWF: Two years ago, we stunned many of you by selecting McMahon Announcer of the Year, something we never anticipated doing. McMahon had finished a tremendous first year on *Monday Night Raw*, had toned down his obnoxious and overbearing histrionics and truly executed the mechanics of both in-ring commentary and quality ringside interviews as a science. In 1993, Vince was the best.

Whether it is from feeling the oats of having defeated the federal government or continuing to draw bigger buy-rates than World Championship Wrestling, even with WCW's owning Hulk Hogan, some of McMahon's most recent work has been virtually unintelligible. We

took a three look at a McMahon call of Sid Vicious vs. Aldo Montoya on *Superstars of Wrestling*. Barely ten per cent of Vince's description was understandable. His drift into carnival barker patter would be pleasing compared to this delivery. Vince has been calling some bouts as a carnival barker with marbles in his mouth.

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His In Your House work was better than the last few shows, largely because Michael Hayes as Doc Hendrix is toning down the comedy and playing the moderate heel. In fairness, part of the problem has been the constant rotation of analysts on both cable and syndication which has kept McMahon from consistency.

That will likely settle down with Hayes apparently settling in on *Superstars* and Jerry Lawler on *Raw*. But no analyst can stop McMahon's penchant for the obnoxious. When he eliminates the roar, he has one of the best broadcast voices for commentary in any form of entertainment. But he doesn't use the best of his voice enough. This year, he's been enough to make one pine for the guy on *Action Zone*.

OVERALL GRADE: C -

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Men on the Mike

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Lance Russell, USWA: Lance has put on a clinic during 1995 and is doing it with the least amount of talent the USWA has ever had. Perhaps, as stated in his co-Announcer of the Year selection story in this publication earlier, the weaker talent base is why Lance does not dominate the major voting categories in yearender polls.

A number of announcers tend to lose a step or ten or twenty when they reach the seasoned citizen category. If anything, Lance only grows smoother.

If an element is frustrating to Lance's work in the last year since returning to the Memphis TV fold, one sees him struggling to pull out the kind of aggressiveness and intensity in heels he could engender when Jerry Lawler, Bill Dundee, Jackie Fargo and Sputnik Monroe were in their prime. Today's Memphis meanies, with the possible exception of the wavering Brian Christopher and the recently-departed Tommy Rich, aren't even at the Class AA level.

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If WCW wanted to shore up the weakest part of Schiavone's game, it would obtain a tape of (Lance's interview with Rich and Gilbert) and make Tony watch it until he gets it right.

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However, a spring standoff between Lance and the Rich-Doug Gilbert tag team was a classic. No one ever accuses Russell of being a statue who merely holds the mike. Lance aggressively and almost defiantly pointed out recent misdeeds of Rich and Gilbert at a Mid-South Coliseum card. When the villains attempted alibis, Lance never retreated. "You come out here every week, you say you don't do these things," said Lance. "What do you think we do, run around with blindfolds on?"

The interview was a textbook for announcers attempting to learn the challenge interview which was a classic for such mike stalwarts as Ed Capral, the 1960s and '70s-era Gordon Solie and one-time Gulf Coast voice John Goss. As was recommended in the last issue of *Matwatch '95*, if WCW wanted to shore up the weakest part of Tony Schiavone's game—the interview with heels—it would obtain a copy of that interview and make Tony watch it until he gets it right.

One can argue with a measurable degree of success that the return of Lance Russell may have helped save the USWA from a slow death as a live show in Memphis. If anything, Lance's attention to detail is as good as it ever was. Now if only the wrestling talent could catch up to the announcer.

OVERALL GRADE: A

Gorilla Monsoon, WWF: The best thing which can be said for Gorilla is that he is not becoming a total embarrassment. He has been slowly running out of gas for the last six years. However, he is clearly no longer in the upper echelon of the industry's performers.

Monsoon has performed admirably in the last year, considering the sudden loss of his son in an automobile accident and the struggles he has with his own diabetes. His enthusiasm level has been above average but Gorilla relies on more cliches than a ninth grade creative writing class. This is the man who holds the record for the most utterances of "close, but no cigar" in a given year.

From a technical level, if anything, Monsoon has grown worse than McMahon at discussing other material than the specific wrestlers in-ring during a given TV match. His best effort in the last year was in the analyst role at last November's *Survivor Series*. Moments after Bob Backlund beat Bret Hart for the WWF title, Gorilla calmly looked at McMahon and retorted, "Bob Backlund—WWF champion. We're in trouble, Vince."

OVERALL GRADE: C -

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Jim Ross, WWF: Rossie has finally settled into a good routine. With the exception of an occasional top-marquee bout on *Raw*, Ross gets the showcase bouts for television. To a large degree, the entire *Action Zone* concept is tailored to Ross' talents.

While he still is not being turned loose in the fashion of his classic UWF brawls, no announcer can build intensity and push to the crescendo as can Ross.

His work on Smoky Mountain was as close to his trademark variety but the genuine strength of *Zone* is its commentary is live and topical. One of Jim's underrated strengths has been his ability to bring current events into the picture without being abrasive.

Ross probably won't get the Announcer of the Year nods from a lot of groups again this year, largely because he doesn't have the most visible show and McMahon has insisted on doing all the pay-per-views of late. But Jim is at the top of his game and shows no indication of slipping.

OVERALL GRADE: A

Eric Bischoff, WCW: This review is going to surprise a few people. When Bischoff removed himself from *WCW Worldwide*, we considered he had done us all a favor. Short of McMahon, no announcer could be more obnoxious in the industry.

However, Bischoff redeemed himself a bit during the lackluster *WCW Slamboree*. While he still comes across as "too cool" during on-camera appearances, Bischoff did a quality job of getting over the closing angle of the Ric Flair-Arm Anderson attack on Angelo Poffo. Plus, Bischoff set the proper tone for the poignant Hall of Fame introductions, as bogus as the WCW Hall of Fame is.

He will never be close to the category of the Ross-Russell-1993 McMahon-earlier era Gordon Solie. But Bischoff did show signs of disciplining himself to not overshadow a broadcast, as he has often previously done. Perhaps the slow pace of the *Slamboree* bouts could have affected that; however, Bischoff delivered.

OVERALL GRADE: C +

Mark Nulty, NWA Championship: Nulty had a short run during the late 1980s on some of the ESPN shows from the Sportatorium and has frequently been a close follower of the newsletters to stay abreast of the insider action.

Nulty neither offends nor excites. He has an acceptable energy level but often fails to catch the moves quickly enough to keep pace with the action when a closing move is developing.

The one advantage he has is being from the Dallas area, he is familiar with the competitors who, by now, appear to have haunted the Sportatorium for more than 100 years.

Mark still needs a lot of experience to crack the level of a "big two" performer. But he can handle the job required for a promotion which is barely clinging to a few scattered TV markets and may be on the verge of a merger with the Mississippi-based Deep South Wrestling.

OVERALL GRADE: C

Dave Brown, USWA: This is one of the smoothest guys in the business and while we didn't like Dave nodding agreement in an advocacy position during the Jerry Lawler legal woes last year, that is one of the few criticisms we have ever had of this talented performer.

Dave is slowly moving into the level of the much-admired Bob Caudle, delivering commentary week-in and week-out as an old smoothie. The keynote for Brown's style—and it seems to have resurfaced even stronger in the last year with his old compadre Lance Russell back at his side—is relaxed. He can be intense, yet never break stride with the patter developed over years as a veteran weathercaster and commercial spokesperson.

The Russell-Brown team is arguably the best duo in the business, in that they never intrude on bouts. I maintain Dave is the only guy and Memphis the only city in America to pull off a weathercaster doubling as a mat commentator without a dilution in his credibility.

The enthusiasm is genuine and Brown knows how to get the action over when the key angles are developing. To his credit, when Lance is away, he doesn't try to be Lance. He is the epitome of the announcer who knows his strengths and knows how to be himself. If anything, Dave simply has never commanded the headlines as other performers at the mike have. He just goes about it in his own quiet way.

OVERALL GRADE: A -
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Report Card

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Corey Macklin, USWA: One could not consider a wrapup of the men behind the mike complete without one last look at Corey.

In truth, one can sense a bit of improvement in Macklin since Lance Russell has been back in the host's chair. One, because you hear a lot less of Corey. The other: he's stopped saying, "LAW-luh," as his most dramatic comment during one of Jerry's bouts and I cannot recall a recent time where he's uttered his old cliché, "That's ridiccalus."

To be frank, Macklin has been a decent sport even when confronted with less than tongue-in-cheek barbs from Brian Christopher about being the worst announcer in the history of wrestling.

But I'm convinced Corey doesn't know the name of a solitary wrestling hold until Dave Brown first describes it. And Corey has the best echo delivery in the business. Whatever his mike partner says, Corey will chime in the same words within a matter of seconds.

The best thing about Corey Macklin is he makes Lance and Dave look and sound even better.

OVERALL GRADE: D -

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*As Time
Goes
By*

The reason we are mailing one instead of the promised two issues of *Matwatch* for May is because of a major accident in my office and to my computer. A major rainstorm pelted us and the force of the water, coupled with the clogging of the drain in the roof of my Union University complex, crashed through the ceiling tiles, sloshing my computer and about 25 valuable videotapes. My colleague in the next office lost several priceless personal books. This issue is being produced on a borrowed computer which is not tied in with a laser printer; however, my great thanks to Dr. Jim Edwards for giving me time on his unit. We are awaiting an insurance settlement—so expect two issues in June, which should serve to get us back on track with all subscribers....A tragic loss to Jimmy Hart on the evening of *Slamboree* when his mother, Sadie, was killed in a head-on collision about a block from Hart's home in Tampa. She lived only a few blocks away from Jimmy. Her car was hit head-on by a driver traveling 55 mph along Hillsborough Avenue in Tampa....A relief but a complex question created from the internet rumor of the death of Scott Armstrong the weekend of May 20-21. This is the second false alarm on a wrestler's supposed death in the last six months (Scott Steiner died in computerland earlier this year). Guys, particularly where a death is concerned, it's far more important to be right than first. You have to know the rumor, fast as it spread, reached Bob, Steve, Brad and Brian.

Speaking of the Armstrongs, inside word within WCW is that Brad—after the supposed suspension is up—is being groomed to become either Captain Planet or a Planet-like character. The front office has apparently gained permission from Ted Turner to use the character as a wrestler. If so, big problem: Captain Planet can't lose or the character is forever tarnished....Jim Crockett's *NWA Championship* show is now on the American Independent Network (AIN) Mondays at 10 p.m. (EDT), one hour ahead of its airing on Channel America....The Crockett teaming with the Mississippi-based Deep South promotion is regarded in some quarters as Jim's tossing in the towel on Dallas. He's told some people he makes money on his small-town spot shows but loses it all every time he runs Dallas.

We will be making a return visit for two weeks to Parnu, Estonia, in the Baltic by the time you read this. We return home June 7 and twelve days later, Rebecca and I will become parents of 10-year-old Melody and six-year-old Holly. Not a bad day-after-Father's Day gift....Late last week, word was filtering of Paul Heyman close to an investor to pour up to \$2 million into ECW as seed money to take the group national. But not all parties are agreed on that move. Stay tuned for more. FSB.

Raw Posts Record April

NEW YORK—Extending a string into May of 57 ratings victories in 60 head-to-head weeks, *Monday Night Raw* soared to its all-time record average during April, posting a 3.7 rating and 5.5 per cent share of audience. The numbers were the strongest for any weekly wrestling series on cable in five years.

Raw, which scored its record 3.9 rating during April (see Vol. 2-3 double issue), posted its strongest margin of victory ever over *WCW Saturday Night*.

The TBS flagship show dipped to a 2.2/4.9 in April, only one-tenth of a point higher than the show was recording in the same month two years ago when Eric Bischoff first took over the creative helm of the promotion.

The Sunday *Main Event* show registered a rare rally to finish third for the month at 2.0/3.9.

Titan Sports' new *Action Zone* continues to find the sledding tough opposite powerhouse sports competition in the noon hour Sundays. *Zone* could only muster a 1.8/4.8 during April.

The Saturday morning race went to *WCW Pro* over *Mania*, 1.6/6.5 to 1.4/4.3.

A complete wrapup of the April and May numbers will be featured in the first of two June issues.

Raw continues to set a blistering pace in the first two weeks of May, with a 3.3/4.8 even against the competition of tough network miniseries and May sweeps specials. *Saturday Night* has rallied to post a 2.5/5.7 at mid-month.

In Your House

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When all reports are in, *House* is expected to post between 220,000 and 230,000 buys with an estimated gross subscription revenue figure of \$3.6 million.

In the week prior to *WCW Slamboree*, cable operators were not optimistic of the Hulk Hogan name carrying them to a 1 per cent buy-rate as two of Hogan's previous shows have scored. Advance buys were tracking toward a buy-rate in the 0.8 range for the St. Petersburg special.

When asked, a spokesman for Cablevision industries said: "You can't isolate the promotion enough on these shows, now that they're coming at you every two weeks and some every week. We just do the best we can to keep awareness before the public but, obviously, we'll reach a saturation point."

MATWATCH '95

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